PRODIGALITY FOR PRODIGALS
Luke 15:11-32 (Phillips)
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Jesus told a story about a father and two sons, a very realistic story that struck painfully close to home for His listeners. In many Jewish families of His day the younger son left home to seek his fortune, often traveling to one of the important Roman or Greek cities. And the eldest son usually stayed home to manage the family business or farm. He could better afford to remain since the law provided the eldest with a double inheritance - twice as much as the younger son.

We know this parable almost by heart and usually call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But Jesus really told about two prodigal sons; the parable is a two-edged teaching. And the fact that we commonly think of only the younger son as the wastrel says something about the way we see ourselves.

When I rather idly used my Webster's to check whether I understood the meaning of prodigal, I learned something that prompts me to retitle the parable "Prodigality for Prodigals", as the sermon title reads. It turns out a prodigal is precisely what I thought - one who is wasteful. But prodigality is something else again. It can mean wastefulness, but my dictionary spends more space describing prodigality as great abundance, lavishness, extreme generosity, bounteousness. Prodigality is what comes from the father in the parable: Prodigality, extreme generosity, great abundance of love. But both sons are prodigals, wasteful of that love. (I don't expect my name for the parable to catch on, but that doesn't keep me from trying.)

The first part of the story is what we are most familiar, most comfortable with. It can be considered the story of everyman's pilgrimage. What it describes most graphically is God's love, His giving us our freedom and His open arms when we finally use that freedom to return to Him.

The German preacher Helmut Thielicke imagines the story beginning this way: "**Surely** the father and son in the parable must have talked about this many times. The son would say, 'Father, I want to be independent. You must give me my freedom. I can't go on listening to this everlasting "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not."' And the father replies: 'My dear boy, do you really think you have no freedom? After all, you are the child in the house, you can come to me any time you wish, and you can tell me anything and everything that troubles you...I love you and I give you your daily bread, I forgive your debts with joy whenever you bring to me the burdens of your heart. You are quite free and subject to no one; you don't have to account to anybody except me. And yet you complain that you are not free.'

"And the son flares up and says, 'No, father, to be honest with you I don't care a hoot about all that. I can't stand this constant training. For me freedom means to be able to do what I want to do.' And the father quietly replies, 'And for me freedom means that you should become what you ought to be. You should not, for example, become a servant of your desires or a slave to your ambition.'"

But of course this means very little to the boy. He leaves home in quest of his freedom, convinced that freedom means to be able to do whatever he wants. You only go around once, after all. The freedom he pursues is self-centeredness, selfishness, self-indulgence. He grabs all the gusto he can get. It is a false freedom which reduces, demeans him, finally robs him of all self-respect. Feeding pigs was the most shameful job imaginable for a Jew. Hitting bottom, having wasted everything his father had trusted to him, the boy finds one spark of truth remaining within: "Not for this shame was I born!" And he turns and takes the first step homeward.

Then Jesus tells how he is received. The father rushes to meet him as soon as he comes in sight - unthinkable for a family patriarch to be so undignified. The old man hushes the son's apologies and calls everyone to share a feast of celebration, for his son has returned. That is a description of bounteous, lavish love. Such prodigality of love is God's way with us all.

But the story doesn't end here. It turns out there is another prodigal, staying at home but just as self-centered, still wasting his father's lavish love. So now Jesus focusses on the elder brother and he turns out to be the main point for the whole story.

Once, when I was much younger and brasher, I preached about the elder brother. I began by referring to a national religious survey which showed that there are far more eldest siblings - more elder brothers and elder sisters - among Presbyterians than in the population as a whole. Then I went on, simply retelling the parable in contemporary terms. The reaction was sharp. I heard about that sermon for weeks, and very little of it complimentary. So I decided never again to rouse a Presbyterian congregation by pointing out how elder-brotherish they are. Which is the reason I am not even going to mention it today. It wouldn't do me any good anyway - I'm an elder brother myself.

Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Prodigal Son" suggests that the older son's attitude helped drive the younger away from home. Kipling puts these words into the younger boy's mouth:

> "I never was very refined, you see,
> (And it weighs on my brother's mind, you see)
> But there's no reproach among swine, d'you see,
> For being a bit of a swine.
> So I'm off with wallet and staff to eat
> The bread that is three parts chaff to wheat,
> But glory be! -- there's a laugh to it,
> Which isn't the case when we dine."

According to Kipling, when the younger son returned home, if he had run into his brother before meeting his father, he might well have turned right around and left home again.

The older boy had stayed at home and enjoyed all the benefits of his father's affection and love. But he, too, was a prodigal. How much he had wasted that love shows in the only words he speaks about his younger brother. He complains to his father: "...when that son of yours arrives, who has spent all your money on prostitutes..." How revealing - "son of yours" - denying any relationship to his brother. Not "this brother of mine", but "this son of yours". And not even the benefit of the doubt. The younger boy's escapades had all taken place far away in a foreign land. No way the older boy could know any details, but he assumes the worst: "spent all your money on prostitutes". He didn't know whether that was so or not, but he was very quick to judge harshly; it was an automatic reflex with him.

This is a picture of an elder son who is always taking a sideway's glance in the mirror to admire his own goodness. He is absolutely convinced of his own righteousness and looks down his nose at anyone who doesn't measure up to his credentials. Don't try to tell him he has any relationship with people on the relief rolls. He knows they are lazy and shiftless. After all, he has always been able to find a job. He is sure women receiving Aid to Dependent Children are worthless sluts. He rejects

troublemakers who picket and demonstrate and rebel: "They ought to be locked up to protect society." To him, the Iranian Moslems are crazy fanatics. The hungry and homeless in Cambodia need to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. In short, the elder brother has little patience and less use for those different from him, who live by other values, whose lifestyle displeases him. Don't try to convince him that such people are his brothers and sisters unless you want to be laughed at.

In most things the elder brother is a very moral person. He has always remained very close to his spiritual home - the lessons and morals learned in Sunday School. For the most part he conducts his life in accordance with the ethical teachings of Christianity. He should be sharing all the benefits of the abundant life, all the joy and love of his father's home. So what keeps him from the celebration? Why isn't there more satisfaction in his life?

Whenever I think about this elder prodigal son, I am always reminded of another story, one I've mentioned to a few of you. It is about Leonardo da Vinci, the great painter. Da Vinci was in the early stages of working on a religious painting and wanted to paint the figure of Judas. How should the betrayer of Jesus be portrayed? Well, da Vinci resolved the matter easily: he simply painted the face of a man he disliked very much, a man he felt took advantage of him whenever he got the chance. But then, with that man's face as Judas, when da Vinci wanted to paint the other figures on the canvas, he couldn't bring to his imagination any likeness of the face of Jesus, and the figure of Christ was to be central.

Da Vinci was frustrated and the painting remained unfinished. He put it aside for several months. As the days went past, events happened that helped da Vinci understand the man he had painted as Judas and he felt sorry he had portrayed him that way. So he took out the canvas and painted over the insult - substituted an anonymous face for the betrayer. Then, the story goes, da Vinci had a dream that night in which he clearly saw Christ's face. He completed the painting the next day. I do not know about the historical accuracy of that story, but I will vouch for the moral and religious truth of it.

Jesus told a story about two prodigal sons, wasteful of their father's love in different ways, but both wasteful. In both cases the father went out to them. He ran up the road to greet the returning younger son. When the older boy wouldn't come to the celebration, the father went out to coax him, to try to get him into the happy family. Prodigality, great abundance of love - that was the father's response to both his prodigal sons. The father's arms were wide open and he sought them out.

The parable ends as the father is coaxing the elder brother to accept the younger and come into the feast. Jesus does not tell us what happened. Did the elder brother decide to understand and forgive the younger, even ask the younger to forgive him, and thus join the party? Or did the elder son remain unforgiving, unwilling to understand, unable to accept the younger as truly his brother? Did he ignore his father's pleading? Did he turn his back on his father's love because he would not turn his face toward his brother?

The parable ends on that question. It is up to us. Our heavenly Father's arms are opened wide to us, His prodigal sons and daughters. The feast awaits.

Amen.

Most loving God, our heavenly Father, may we turn our lives to receive your abundant love by offering our own love to all Your children, our brothers and sisters. Inspire us by the teaching and example of the Christ,who so loves us all that He gave His life.

Amen.